

Machiavelli's Letter to Vettori

In the following letter, which has been called the most celebrated in all of Italian literature, Machiavelli describes one day in his life and remarks casually that he has just completed *The Prince*. The letter was written in response to his friend Francesco Vettori, Florentine ambassador in Rome, who had previously sent a letter describing a day in *his* life. Machiavelli's reply is partly a parody of Vettori's somewhat self-important recounting, but it also gives us a glimpse, from the outside, of the political philosopher at work. We learn, among other things, that *The Prince* arose from conversations with the ancients, and that, in it, Machiavelli delved as deeply as he could into his subject.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI TO FRANCESCO VETTORI,
FLORENCE, DECEMBER 10, 1513.

Magnificent ambassador:

“Never were divine favors late.”¹ I say this because I appear to have lost, no, mislaid your favor, since you have gone a long time without writing me, and I was doubtful whence the cause could arise. And of all those that came to my mind I took little account except for one, when I feared you had stopped writing to me because someone had written to you that I was not a good warden of your letters; and I knew that, apart from Filippo and Pagolo, no one else had seen them on account of me. I regained your favor by your last letter of the 23rd of last month, where I was very pleased to see how orderedly and quietly you exercise this public office; and I urge you to continue so, for whoever lets go of his own convenience for the convenience of others, only loses his own and gets no thanks from them. And because Fortune wants to do everything, she wants us to allow her to do it, to remain quiet and not give trouble, and to await the

1. Petrarch, *Triumph of Divinity*, 13.

time at which she allows men something to do; and then it will be right for you to give more effort, to watch things more, and for me to leave my villa and say: "Here I am." Therefore, wishing to return equal favors, I cannot tell you in this letter of mine anything other than what my life is like, and if you judge that it should be bartered for yours, I will be content to exchange it.

I stay in my villa, and since these last chance events occurred,² I have not spent, to add them all up, twenty days in Florence. Until now I have been catching thrushes with my own hands. I would get up before day, prepare traps, and go out with a bundle of cages on my back, so that I looked like Geta when he returned from the harbor with Amphitryon's books; I caught at least two, at most six thrushes. And so passed all September; then this pastime, though annoying and strange, gave out, to my displeasure. And what my life is like, I will tell you. I get up in the morning with the sun and go to a wood of mine that I am having cut down, where I stay for two hours to look over the work of the past day, and to pass time with the wood-cutters, who always have some disaster on their hands either among themselves or with their neighbors. And regarding this wood I would have a thousand beautiful things to tell you of what happened to me with Frosino da Panzano and others who want wood from it. And Frosino in particular sent for a number of loads without telling me anything, and on payment wanted to hold back ten lire from me, which he said he should have had from me four years ago when he beat me at *cricca* at Antonio Guicciardini's. I began to raise the devil and was on the point of accusing the driver who had gone for it of theft; but Giovanni Machiavelli came between us and brought us to agree. Batista Guicciardini, Filippo Ginori, Tommaso del Bene,

2. Perhaps a reference to NM's imprisonment and torture in February and March of 1513.

and some other citizens, when that north wind was blowing, ordered a load each from me. I promised to all, and sent one to Tommaso which in Florence turned into a half-load, because to stack it up there were himself, his wife, his servant, and his children, so that they looked like Gabbura with his boys when he bludgeons an ox on Thursday. So, when I saw whose profit it was, I told the others I had no more wood; and all have made a big point of it, especially Batista, who counts this among the other disasters of Prato.

When I leave the wood, I go to a spring, and from there to an aviary of mine. I have a book under my arm, Dante or Petrarch, or one of the minor poets like Tibullus, Ovid, and such. I read of their amorous passions and their loves; I remember my own and enjoy myself for a while in this thinking. Then I move on along the road to the inn; I speak with those passing by; I ask them news of their places; I learn various things; and I note the various tastes and different fancies of men. In the meantime comes the hour to dine, when I eat with my company what food this poor villa and tiny patrimony allow. Having eaten, I return to the inn; there is the host, ordinarily a butcher, a miller, two bakers. With them I become a rascal for the whole day, playing at *cricca* and *tric-trac*, from which arise a thousand quarrels and countless abuses with insulting words, and most times we are fighting over a penny and yet we can be heard shouting from San Casciano. Thus involved with these vermin I scrape the mold off my brain and I satisfy the malignity of this fate of mine, as I am content to be trampled on this path so as to see if she will be ashamed of it.

When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently reclothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to

ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me. And for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me. I deliver myself entirely to them. And because Dante says that to have understood without retaining does not make knowledge,³ I have noted what capital I have made from their conversation and have composed a little work *De Principatibus* [On Principalities], where I delve as deeply as I can into reflections on this subject, debating what a principality is, of what kinds they are, how they are acquired, how they are maintained, why they are lost. And if you have ever been pleased by any of my whimsies, this one should not displease you; and to a prince, and especially to a new prince, it should be welcome. So I am addressing it to his Magnificence, Giuliano.⁴ Filippo Cassavecchia has seen it; he can give you an account in part both of the thing in itself and of the discussions I had with him, although I am all the time fattening and polishing it.

You wish, magnificent ambassador, that I leave this life and come to enjoy your life with you. I will do it in any case, but what tempts me now is certain dealings of mine which I will have done in six weeks. What makes me be doubtful is that the Soderini are there, whom I would be forced, if I came, to visit and speak with. I should fear that at my return I would not expect to get off at my house, but I would get off at the Bargello,⁵ for although this state has very great foundations and great security, yet it is new, and because of this suspicious; nor does it lack wiseacres who, to

3. *Paradiso*, V, 41-42.

4. Giuliano de' Medici, the duke of Nemours, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. He left Florence in September of 1513 and was in Rome at the time of NM's letter. He died in 1516, and NM decided to dedicate *The Prince* to Lorenzo de' Medici, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who became duke of Urbino in 1516.

5. The prison, because NM would be suspected of plotting with the Soderini for the return of the previous regime.

appear like Pagolo Bertini, would let others run up a bill and leave me to think of paying. I beg you to relieve me of this fear, and then I will come in the time stated to meet you anyway.

I have discussed with Filippo this little work of mine, whether to give it to him⁶ or not; and if it is good to give it, whether it would be good for me to take it or send it to you. Not giving it would make me fear that at the least it would not be read by Giuliano and that this Ardinghelli would take for himself the honor of this latest effort of mine. The necessity that chases me makes me give it, because I am becoming worn out, and I cannot remain as I am for a long time without becoming despised because of poverty, besides the desire I have that these Medici lords begin to make use of me even if they should begin by making me roll a stone. For if I should not then win them over to me, I should complain of myself; and through this thing, if it were read, one would see that I have neither slept through nor played away the fifteen years I have been at the study of the art of the state. And anyone should be glad to have the service of one who is full of experience at the expense of another. And one should not doubt my faith, because having always observed faith, I ought not now be learning to break it. Whoever has been faithful and good for forty-three years, as I have, ought not to be able to change his nature, and of my faith and goodness my poverty is witness.

I should like, then, for you to write me again on how this matter appears to you, and I commend myself to you.

Be prosperous.

10 December 1513

Niccolò Machiavelli, in Florence.

6. Giuliano.